

Organization

Using Your Syllabus

Every semester you get access to or a physical copy of syllabi for your courses. But why? What's the point? Do you ever look at it again? Do you look at it regularly?

Let's go over how to read your syllabus, how to break it down, and how to make it work for you.

Step 1: The Basics

Locate the following:

Course days, times, locations - make sure you get there

- Professor's info
 - Name and email
 - Office hours
 - Office location
- Calendar or overview of the semester, might be by week, class day or unit

Step 2: Course Policies

Take a look at:

- Grading information - are your grades weighted or total points?
 - Weighted grades place an emphasis on specific items
 - A class where tests are worth 70% of your grade, good and bad test scores will impact your overall grade more
 - A class where assignments are worth 10% of your grade, one assignment won't impact your grade much
 - Total points still place emphasis on specific items based on total points, but you can make up low scores by doing well in other areas
 - Is the class or anything in it graded on a curve?
 - Are there any extra credit opportunities?
- Attendance policy - how many classes can you miss? Does it matter if you're excused or unexcused? How and when do you need to contact your professor? Does it impact your grade?
- Participation grades - does it exist? How is it graded?
- Are there any other unique policies?

Step 3: Assignments/Discussions/Quizzes/Projects

Now look through the week by week or unit by unit breakdown. You're looking for the following:

- Are there readings?
 - How frequent?
 - How long are the readings? How much time will you need to do them?
 - Is there a reading quiz or weekly quiz you'll need to prep for?
- Are there smaller assignments?
 - How frequent?
 - What are they? Reflections? Worksheets? Papers?
 - When are they due? Does it seem to be the same day each week?

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- How does your professor plan to check your knowledge?
 - Just large tests?
 - Weekly quizzes?
 - Projects?
 - Are the assignments the only regular check?
- What are the larger assignments?
 - Projects?
 - Papers?
 - Group assignments?
- Are there online discussions or points for participating in class discussions?
 - How frequent?
 - How much are they worth?
 - Are they structured by day? By week? By unit?
- Is there a rubric for projects/papers?

Step 5: Big Assessments

- How many tests are there?
- Is there a pattern? Midterm and final only? Every 3 or so weeks? Every other week?
- How much does each chapter cover? Is it a set unit from the textbook? Or does the professor choose specific topics?
- Is the final cumulative?
- When is the final?
- Is there a cumulative project instead of a final?

Tips for Organizing the Information

Once you've gone through your syllabus, it might be a good idea to write this information down or record it in one location. There are several ideas below. What is important is that you find what works for you.

1. Google Calendar: set tasks or reminders for due dates. Depending on how many items are due, you may not want to set a reminder for everything. Maybe set reminders for the biggest things.

2. Semester Planner: write down everything in a planner or on a document for the whole semester. Add notes a week or two before big tests/projects. Cross things off as you finish them. You can color code by class or priority if needed on busy weeks. This can be helpful to see when you will be busy v. when you might have a slower week. You can prepare for the busy weeks by doing things in advance.

3. Create a cheat sheet: write or type the information you've learned following the above steps. Organize it onto a single piece of paper or single document. It'll make it easier to see the information for all classes at once rather than flipping through multiple syllabi or different Canvas pages (possible example on next page).

4. Weekly to-do: every Sunday sit down for about an hour. Go through what you've learned and review the week. Use a weekly planning sheet, planner, Google calendar, something to sketch out a plan for the week. Knowing what's coming can help you take advantage of the small breaks in your day during busier weeks. Take that hour break in the morning to read a chapter or do an assignment instead of saving it for 10 pm.